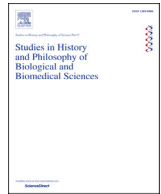




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Essay review

## As close to the definitive Dennett as we're going to get

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**Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking, Daniel C. Dennett. Penguin Books, London & New York (2014). pp. xiv + 498, Price UK £9.99 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-241-95462-1**

### 1. Introduction

Daniel Dennett's *Intuition pumps and other tools for thinking* is his most exciting, original, and rigorous work since *Darwin's dangerous idea* (1995), published almost twenty years ago. It is also Dennett's most sustained and explicit discussion, in print, of his distinctive philosophical method. Dennett is notorious for eschewing the standard methodology of his discipline: analytic philosophy's fetishization of formal, conceptual analysis. In this book, he defends his maverick philosophical style, largely through illustration. The book is a compendium of thinking tools, or "intuition pumps", mostly devised by him in other writings, meant to show their utility (and sometimes lack thereof) at elucidating conceptual puzzles at the heart of the subject matter to which Dennett has devoted his long and distinguished career: the place of the human mind in nature, as understood by contemporary science. However, the book is also more than a mere compendium of thinking tools. In the process of exploring his conceptual toolbox, Dennett paints a compelling picture of the nature of the human mind. This thematic duality, the simultaneous expounding of philosophical method and content, is unavoidable given Dennett's understanding of the human mind, according to which it is distinctive in its competence at inventing and wielding culturally transmitted cognitive tools. Dennett's philosophical method is tailored to the needs of human minds as he conceives them: he aspires to enrich the conceptual toolbox we use to think about our own nature and its place in the universe.

According to Dennett, human minds succeed in some domain only to the extent that they wield cognitive tools that are well

crafted for navigating it. When the domain is the human mind itself, and its place in nature, successful navigation is especially fraught. The reason is that we are burdened with a cultural inheritance of poorly crafted tools for thinking about this subject matter. Unfortunately, according to Dennett, rather than discarding such tools and replacing them with better ones, many contemporary philosophers merely elaborate obsolete tools for thinking about the mind, giving them a seductively shiny, modern veneer that makes them all the more difficult to dislodge. The central, animating theme of Dennett's book is a clear characterization of the key difference between useful and counterproductive cognitive tools for thinking about the human mind. The latter all share a key defect. To use Dennett's own words, they mistake "a failure of imagination for an insight into necessity" (1991a, p. 401). The former, on the other hand, enhance our imaginative capacities, exploring what *can* be the case, rather than wallowing in what *can't*.

As an example, consider Frank Jackson's famous "Knowledge Argument" (Jackson, 1982). According to Dennett this is a counterproductive cognitive tool (2014, pp. 347–351). It asks us to imagine a color vision scientist named Mary who learns every physical, biological, scientifically expressible fact about human color vision, while unable to experience color directly herself. This is meant to "pump" the following intuition: there must be non-physical facts about human color vision, since Mary knows all the physical facts yet not what it is like to see color. Dennett calls such conceptual tools "boom crutch[es] ... thinking tools that backfire, the ones that only *seem* to aid in understanding but that actually spread darkness and confusion instead of light" (2014, p. 14). The point is that such tools mistake failures of imagination—in this case, what it would be like to know every physical fact about human color vision—for insights into necessity—in this case, that there are facts about human color vision that science will never explain. As an example of a useful thinking tool, on the other hand, consider Dennett's thought experiment about a giant robot designed to keep your cryogenically frozen body intact until the twenty-fifth century, in the face of imperfectly predictable environmental challenges (2014, pp. 166–174). Dennett gradually proposes additions to the capacities such a robot would need to have in

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order to succeed at its task, eventually concluding that only an artificially intelligent android could stand a chance. Then Dennett unmasks the point he is making. According to Richard Dawkins' influential contemporary version of Darwin's theory of evolution (1976), we humans are strictly analogous to such robots: we have been designed over millions of years to keep intact and promulgate our "selfish genes" in imperfectly predictable environments. Dennett's point is that there may be less difference between artificial and natural intelligence than many philosophers assume. His thought experiment enhances our imaginations in order to make intuitive something that at first seems counter-intuitive.

Dennett's basic insight is that there are under-explored possibilities implicit in contemporary scientific ideas about human nature that are, for various well understood reasons, difficult for brains like ours to grasp. However, there is a familiar remedy for this situation: as our species has done throughout its history when restrained by the cognitive limitations of the human brain, the solution is to engineer new cognitive tools that enable us to transcend these limitations. Just as the invention of Arabic numerals made previously inconceivable mathematical feats routine for creatures with brains like ours, Dennett hopes that the cognitive tools he has crafted for thinking about human minds, over the course of his long career, will have comparably liberating effects on our thought about our own minds and their place in nature.

This ambition explains the organization of the book. Seventy-seven very short chapters, each devoted to a clear and concise discussion of one cognitive tool, are organized into eight sections, flanked by a brief introductory section, and two brief concluding sections, one an optimistic admonition to use cognitive tools to transcend limits on imagination, and the other a brief note on what the book leaves out. Each of the eight meaty sections is devoted to a different aspect of the puzzle of the human mind and its place in nature. Section II discusses a dozen general-purpose thinking tools often employed in thinking about the mind, as well as in other intellectual endeavors. Sections III–V examine twenty-one tools for thinking about meaning and its place in nature, particularly in light of the idea that the human mind is a naturally evolved computer. Section VI discusses nineteen tools for thinking about evolution which, according to Dennett, is the key to understanding how nature managed to grow minds. Section VII turns to twelve tools for thinking about consciousness, and Section VIII to nine tools for thinking about free will. Finally, Section IX discusses four tools for thinking about the distinctive role of philosophy in explaining the human mind and its place in nature. Thus, the book is organized as befits a toolbox for thinking about the human mind and its place in nature: with tools placed in different compartments corresponding to different aspects of this problem.

I cannot hope to do justice to Dennett's rich, nuanced, wide-ranging discussion in this brief essay. Dennett's philosophical imagination and expository skill are inimitable, and I strongly encourage readers to indulge in this characteristically enjoyable read, to fully appreciate the mind-bending ideas it contains. In the remainder of this essay, I suggest some friendly amendments to an overall philosophical posture with which I am overwhelmingly sympathetic.

## 2. In defense of (some) "deepities"

Dennett coins the term "deepity" for apparently profound pronouncements that really say nothing cogent or useful (2014, pp. 56–57). His example is: "Love is just a word" (p. 56). According to Dennett, "deepities" are claims that appear true and profound only thanks to ambiguity: on one reading they are true yet not profound, while on another reading they are manifestly false yet would be profound if true. For example, it is trivially true that the letter string

L-O-V-E is just a word. But it is manifestly false that the phenomenon of love is just a word.

Clearly Dennett is right to warn us about such uses of language. They can be and often are used to forestall useful, critical thought, perhaps deliberately, e.g., by religious authorities who feel threatened by such thought. However, I think he is too quick to dismiss such apparently mystical pronouncements tout court. Some "deepities" can draw attention to features of the human predicament that Dennett himself seems to appreciate in places. For example, because so much of our thought about the world is mediated by language, it is often hard to appreciate that language imposes certain non-compulsory structures on our experience. Dennett famously argues that our practice of expressing thoughts in language leads to the illusion that non-linguistic thought has the hard edges and systematic organization of language. For example, it could be that there is nothing determinate that one wants to consume at a restaurant until one reads the menu and is forced by the words it contains to give one's appetites a greater determinacy than they would ever have on their own (Dennett, 1987, p. 20). Many "deepities" are deliberately constructed to draw attention to such artificial structuring of experience by language; their seemingly paradoxical contents show how some experiences cannot be fully captured using the structures and strictures of public language. Consider Wittgenstein's injunction: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (1922). This certainly seems like a statement Dennett would classify as a "deepity". Yet, it eloquently makes Wittgenstein's point that some uses of language must be treated as ladders to be thrown away because they *show* truths about language and experience that they cannot literally, according to their own strictures, *state*.

Or consider Dennett's own example—another thinking tool—of the mythical "prime mammal" (2014, p. 240). It is very tempting to assume that there must have been a first mammal. At the same time, this seems impossible, as any mammal must have mammals for parents. Our language seems to force us to come down on one side or the other: either there was a first mammal or there was not. But this categorical stricture of language falsifies the Darwinian reality: mammals evolved from mammal-like precursors that were not quite mammals. It is very hard to capture the messy, seamless processes that constitute the history of life in terms of the binary categories of language. Many classic "deepities" are designed to highlight the inadequacy of language at capturing realities that fail to parse as neatly as sentences. Consider Nagarjuna, the Second Century (CE) Indian Buddhist philosopher who arguably did for classical Indian philosophy what Wittgenstein did for modern Western philosophy. Nagarjuna was a prodigious generator of "deepities", such as this gem: "It is empty" is not to be said, nor that something could be non-empty, nor both, nor neither" (cited in Siderits, 2007, p. 204). According to Siderits, the point of such seemingly paradoxical claims is to make manifest the inapplicability of linguistic categories to so-called "ultimate reality". As Wittgenstein appreciated, some things cannot be said in language, but they can be shown through strange uses of language. Or, to put it in terms of Dennett's example, we might say that it is not the case that there either was or was not a first mammal. This "deepity" draws attention to the fact that the linguistic phrase "first mammal" cannot be applied to, i.e., either affirmed or denied of, relevant components of the evolutionary process. Indeed, in his commentary on Nagarjuna, Stephen Batchelor uses the seamless process of evolution to make precisely this point about Nagarjuna's struggles to use language in order to explore its own limits (2000, p. 53). For both Dennett and Nagarjuna, language tends to artificially essentialize a reality that is devoid of essences, and some "deepities" are very effective at drawing attention to this fact.

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